DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 420 754 CE 076 712

AUTHOR Crellin, Ian; Graham, Jim
TITLE The Delivery of Distance Education and Other Community Services through Multi-Role Public Access Facilities in Rural Communities: Australian Experiences.
PUB DATE 1996-00-00
NOTE 5p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Access to Information; Adult Education; Community Education; *Community Services; *Delivery Systems; *Distance Education; *Educational Facilities; Educational Needs; Educational Policy; Educational Practices; Foreign Countries; Information Technology; Public Policy; Rural Areas; *Rural Education; *Telecommunications
IDENTIFIERS *Australia

ABSTRACT

Changes in Australia's rural economy have resulted in reductions in the availability of government services and education and training. One response to these reductions has been the emergence of community-managed multirole facilities that deliver a range of community services, including access to education and training. Although these centers are used for education and training purposes by many rural people, they are not designated expressly for education delivery and do not necessarily employ educational professionals on their staff. Multirole centers have a valid place as education and training access points for smaller rural communities that are too small to sustain dedicated distance education facilities. Telecenters have become the most common form of the multipurpose center approach to community service delivery in rural areas. Telecenters are community-managed facilities that provide public access to computers and information technology for education and training, business enterprise development, and access to a range of government and community services. Multirole access facilities such as telecenters are particularly suited to learners returning to education after a lengthy absence. Australia currently has approximately 120 telecenter-like facilities that are generally highly valued by their host communities and funded by a range of federal, state, local government, and community sources. (MN)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 420 754

The Delivery of Distance Education and Other Community Services Through Multi-Role Public Access Facilities in Rural Communities: Australian Experiences

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

I Crellin

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Ian Crellin and Jim Graham

Telecentres Program, Rural Division
Department of Primary Industries and Energy

Changes in the rural economy have seen reductions in the availability of government services and changes to the availability of education and training. One response to these reductions has been the emergence of community managed multi-role facilities which deliver a range of community services including access to education and training. While these centres are being used for education and training purposes by many rural people, they are not purpose-built for education delivery and do not necessarily employ educational professionals on their staff. These multi-role centres have a valid place as education and training access points for smaller rural communities which are below the size which could sustain a dedicated distance education facility. The learning style also is appropriate for many rural adult learners who may have been away from formal education for some years and they also can provide training and access in the electronic information and communications skills which students will need to take advantage of the increasing range of courses which are available by electronic delivery means from many different types of education and training providers worldwide. Feedback from communities indicates that the range of services delivered are highly valued by the members of the host community

Introduction

The delivery of government services including education and training, to rural and remote areas of Australia has traditionally been achieved by a mix of face-to-face delivery through facilities such as offices and schools in country towns and correspondence. Those people who live outside these towns either travelled to use these facilities or depended on postal correspondence to access the available services.

Changes occurring in rural communities have challenged the ability of this traditional model of service delivery to deliver services in an efficient and cost-effective manner, resulting in service withdrawals and related changes in many communities.

In some places, community managed multi-role facilities are providing a range of services following the reduction in services which were delivered by traditional methods. Many of these centres offer access to a range of education and training options and are often the only facility available for local people to study to improve their skills.

While these centres perform a useful role in their communities, they are sometimes criticised by education professionals because they are not specifically designed for education delivery purposes unlike other facilities such as open learning centres. These issues are examined in this paper.

Challenges Facing Rural and Remote Communities

The rural industries which underpin the economy of many country regions have been affected by fluctuating commodity prices and declining farm incomes since the 1970s. These economic pressures have changed the nature and function of many rural communities. Face-to-face representation has been reduced for many government and commercial services, with the closure of banks, schools, hospitals and other services. The development of improved physical and electronic communications, has seen a major rationalisation of the delivery of services with centralisation in the larger towns and provincial cities and withdrawal from the smaller towns.

The challenges which rural communities are facing in the 1990s include finding alternative means of service delivery which can provide a reasonable level of access to government and commercial services for those people remaining in these communities. It is clear that service providers are not able to maintain a traditional face-to-face presence in smaller communities and the communities themselves are examining innovative alternative means of service delivery to serve the people remaining in their community.

One solution to this problem which has been trialed in a number of rural communities is the establishment of community managed information centres which act as delivery points for a range of services for community members. The ethos of self-help and community responsibility lies at the heart of such an approach. Such

CE 076 712

facilities act as the contact point for many services across different levels of government, plus for commercial and local community service providers. They may be independent or hosted by other community organisations such as neighbourhood houses, regional development programs or business enterprise centres, to share limited resources and develop synergies. With the increasing availability of modern electronic delivery means for distance education, these multi-purpose centres are being used as delivery points for a range of education and training options to meet the needs of individual community members.

Telecentres are the most common form of this approach to community service delivery in rural communities.

The Australian Telecentre Program

Telecentres or telecottages as they are sometimes called, are community managed facilities which provide public access to computers and information technology for education and training, business enterprise development and access to a range of government and community services. Typically a telecentre would consist of several rooms with computer workstations and perhaps a room where small group training might occur. Community members can use the site for both formal and informal learning, and can hire time on computers and related office equipment. They can also use modern computerised telecommunications facilities to interact with colleagues around the world and access information networks including the Internet.

With the increasing importance of the Internet and related networked information systems, the role of telecentres is expanding to include the provision of local training in the Internet and an access point where those people without their own computers can use the Internet on a user pays basis. Some telecentres have become Internet service providers where local subscribers can sign up for Internet services and gain access to the system through modems and telephone routers located in the telecentre.

Education and training will continue to play a major role in improving the productivity of Australian rural industries through the dissemination of new technologies and other related information of importance to farmers and graziers. New telecommunications and information technologies will also play an increasingly central role in the management and marketing of primary products. The support of community services in rural areas is also seen as an important contribution to the social infrastructure of those communities.

In 1992, the Australian Government introduced a funding program to assist rural and remote communities establish local telecentres. The Program is managed by the Department of Primary Industries and Energy (DPIE) as part of the Rural Communities Access Program (RCAP). The Program provided funding for much of the telecentre's capital equipment, plus part-funding for the operating costs including a part-time coordinator's salary , for two years, plus training and network support. This initiative followed a number of experimental developments of a similar nature in diverse fields including community development, distance education and community telecommunications. To obtain funding under the Federal program, a community group had to establish that it genuinely represents its broad community and has undertaken some form of process to map the aims and vision of the community. From this input, a business plan showing reasonable prospects of self-sufficiency in the longer term is essential. The applicants must also be able to demonstrate the existence of a capable and representative community management group for the project.

Funding for telecentres is currently closed pending the outcome of an evaluation of the DPIE Rural Communities Access Program and future government deliberations on continuing involvement in this area.

Access to education and training through telecentres can vary from tertiary level to vocational and informal studies. At tertiary level and for some vocational education, the facilities may be used for on-line tutorials, delivery of video transmitted lectures or the submission of assignments by email. Secondary and primary students may use the facilities for telematic delivery of lessons, particularly where there may only be a small number of students in a town wishing to take a particular subject, for example a foreign language or advanced maths. Many people also wish to undertake study for their own interest and recreation. These cover a wide range of possibilities and includes University of the Third Age which serves retired people.

In addition to providing access to a range of education options, equipment access and training support is provided to people setting out to build small businesses who may not be able to purchase their own computing equipment. A range of other clerical and personal services may also be provided by telecentre clients. In some cases, telecentre groups bid for work which is shared amongst telecentre members. This is known as telework or sometimes, telecommuting. Some telecentres also host community business ventures of various kinds, such as desktop publishing or a local newspaper. They also may be an agency or contact point for various government or commercial service providers.

The experience to date from the program shows that telecentres can perform a useful function in their community. An empathic and supportive coordinator is important for success, particularly in the provision of an empathic learning environment so important for adult learners who often have not had recent educational experience and may not have positive feelings towards education based on their long past school experiences.

The telecentre model is most successful in communities which demonstrate the ability to work cooperatively to a common purpose. Less than 10% of groups have failed and such failures tend to be associated with communities which have not been able to work cooperatively or which do not have a pool of management skills available.

The community telecentre may also fulfil a broader community education role. It brings together a local committee which must plan and manage the facility for the common good of their community. The coordinator and other community members may also participate in management training under the program and learn from the practical example of the achievements of other telecentres. Around the telecentre, there often develops a group of interested community members working for the survival and enhancement of their district, who may become a catalyst for other developmental projects and community enterprise.

The Western Australian Telecentre Program

The Western Australian State Government also commenced a similar program in the early 1990s, drawing heavily on earlier trials and experiments with electronic distance education delivery systems in the Kimberleys area in the remote North West of that State. The early involvement of WA TAFE External Studies and the delivery of in-service training for Government personnel (principally medical and police) led to a strong focus on the delivery of vocational distance education delivered by one-way video from a satellite to WA telecentres. In addition, the Program provided a high level of support and training for telecentre coordinators and management committee members, plus coordination and harmonisation between centres through regular telephone conferencing and mentoring of new groups.

While there is a high level of program involvement coordinating the delivery of education services, coordinators are not necessarily education professionals and remain the employees of the local community management committee who own and run the telecentre. The telecentres are paid for the services which they provide on behalf of education providers, principally WA TAFE. These centres are multi-functional and also provide a wide range of community and individual services to people in their drawing areas. Some even are CES employment agencies, while others are Internet service providers to their local community.

The WA Government has strongly supported telecentres as major providers of government services to communities in rural and remote areas of that State.

Education Delivery Through Community Multi-Role Access Facilities

Multi-role facilities such as telecentres deliver a range of educational courses and resources into rural and remote communities. They are not specialist education facilities and are not necessarily staffed by education professionals. Their role is generally valued by members of their communities. They are however, sometimes criticised by educational professionals who believe that a specialist open learning centre provides a better educational experience for participating students.

Dedicated educational facilities have an important role in the delivery of formal education courses and resources and arguably provide a more professional educational environment than can be provided in a multi-role facility. Such dedicated facilities tend to be tied to the delivery of a stream of approved courses from a limited range of providers who are formally associated with the ownership of the facility. Such a facility is normally only provided where sufficient student enrolments are anticipated for the supported coursework. In addition, they are limited to the provision of courses to enrolled students, and depending on resources, past students are generally not able to return to use the facilities privately for practice and application of the lessons learned after completing their coursework.

Compared to the dedicated open learning facility, the multi-role facility has the following characteristics:

- delivers to communities which would not warrant a dedicated facility;
- more flexible than a dedicated facility in that it makes available all courses from all levels of study and any institution which can be delivered electronically;
- practical for smaller and lower resourced communities to manage;
- gives a sense of community responsibility for solving problems through their own efforts;
- provides a wide range of community needs, both educational and other;
- access to relevant non-formal courses, including University of the Third Age and commercial suppliers;
- in some cases, multi-role sites may have a less professional supervision and learning environment;
- focus on handling adult learners returning to education after long absences from education; and
- students can return after the completion of a course to practice and apply skills which they have learned on the centre's facilities indefinitely.

The major benefits of multi-role facilities lie in their flexibility and world-wide access to the increasing range arrangements with community based learning assistance also is well suited to the type of student found in

small country towns. Anecdotal telecentre experience indicates that this low-key learning environment is suitable for building the confidence of adults returning to education and illustrating to them that education and training offers pathways to help adults improve their vocational and personal situations. Many of these students who start in non-accredited courses gain sufficient confidence to progress into formal or accredited studies. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that many adult learners who re-enter education through multi-role facilities would not have chosen an re-entry option provided by a formal education institution.

The multi-role centre is in a very good position to respond to future developments in the education market. Many education institutions and commercial training providers are currently examining the options for delivering and selling a wide range of education and training through electronic media of various types. Some, including Monash University , are now offering such options to Australian tertiary students. There are also companies emerging who propose to perform a brokering role for people worldwide, linking potential students with courses appropriate to their needs and level of achievement. One consequence of this will be the breakdown of the present regional basis for education delivery and the emergence of a worldwide marketplace for education and training. Education facilities tied to particular regional education providers may be disadvantaged in their ability to provide access for students to this wide range of emerging opportunities.

Both the multi-role facility and the dedicated open learning facility have their strengths and weaknesses. Each address a particular geographic and social target group. Together they provide a broader and more comprehensive coverage of the educational needs of the rural community than either could individually.

Cooperative Action Amongst Open Learning Centres and Other Multi-Role Facilities

There are currently about 120 telecentre-like facilities in rural Australia, with funding from a range of Federal, State, local government and community sources. These include telecentres and a range of similar facilities hosted by organisations such as Skillshare or Business Enterprise Centres.

The Australian Rural Telecentres Association (ARTA) has been formed to represent the common interests of those people and communities associated with telecentres. It also sees a role to promote teleworking in telecentres. The Association gives the broader telecentre community the market power to negotiate the delivery of services Australia-wide, including commercial agency arrangements, teleworking and education delivery. At present, there are no ARTA members with a dominantly educational charter, such as open learning centres. However, it remains a possibility that those distance education bodies which share ARTA's broader agenda may consider joining the Association at some future time.

Conclusion

Changes in the rural economy have resulted in many consequential changes to the living conditions of people in rural and remote communities. In particular, the availability of government services including education and training, has been reduced. One response to this challenge has been the emergence of community managed multi-role facilities which deliver a range of community services including access to education and training. While these centres are being used for a education and training purposes by many rural people, they are not purpose-built for education delivery and do not necessarily employ educational professionals on their staff. The role of these multi-role centres has been examined in this paper and it is argued that they have a valid place as education and training access points for smaller rural communities which are below the size which could sustain a dedicated distance education facility. The learning style also is appropriate for many rural adult learners who may have been away from formal education for some years. They also can provide training and access in the electronic information and communications skills which students will need to take advantage of the increasing range of courses which are available by electronic delivery means from many different types of education and training providers worldwide. Feedback from communities where such multi-role facilities operate indicates that in most cases that the range of services delivered from such centres are highly valued by the members of the host community.

Authors contact details
Ian Crellin and Jim Graham,
Telecentres Program, Rural Division
Department of Primary Industries and Energy
GPO Box 858 CANBERRA ACT 2601